

## California Clapper Rail (*Rallus longirostris obsoletus*)

Status -- Federal: Endangered; California: Endangered



Photo: B. Elliot, CDFG

The California clapper rail lives in coastal salt and brackish marshes and tidal sloughs of San Francisco Bay and Suisun Bay. This secretive waterbird, when fully grown measures about 1 to 1.5 ft (32 - 47 cm) long. Males and females are similar in appearance, with olive brown back and wings marked by dark brown streaks; the breast is rusty cinnamon, and black and white bars criss-cross its flanks. Year-round residents, California clapper rails stay mainly in



California Department of Pesticide Regulation  
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the upper to lower zones of coastal salt marshes dominated by pickleweed and cordgrass. The rails feed in the lower marsh zone where tidal sloughs and channels provide important foraging habitat. In the soft mud exposed during low tides, they use their long, slightly down-curved beaks to probe for invertebrates and seeds.

**Range:** the California clapper rail historically was found in tidal salt marshes and brackish marshes from Humboldt Bay in Humboldt County to Morro Bay in San Luis Obispo County. The rail is now known to occur only in coastal wetlands of

Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, and Sonoma counties, all of which form the San Francisco-Suisun bay complex. Although Suisun Bay was not part of its historical range, the rail colonized this area when water diversions transformed it from fresh-water marsh to brackish marsh. South San Francisco Bay marshes continue to support the largest number of rails in the state.

**Breeding:** The birds most often build their nests near tidal sloughs, using cordgrass, pickleweed, and small amounts of other plants, and usually hide beneath a canopy of vegetation. Both adults share incubation of the 5 to 14 pale, rust-spotted eggs. Once hatched, the black nestlings are soon able to leave the nest, but parental care may continue for several weeks. Some pairs of rails may nest twice in the same season.

**Endangerment:** Widespread urbanization and diking of wetlands in the 1900s led to destruction of marsh habitat. Only 15% of the original 181,000 acres of marshland along San Francisco Bay remains today, and much of this is highly fragmented or altered. Rail eggs have been found to contain elevated levels of mercury, selenium, and other contaminants, probably because sewage effluent, industrial discharges, and urban runoff have contaminated their food supply. In addition, nonnative predators such as red foxes, Norway rats, and feral cats prey on clapper rails and their eggs.